TSB0008

Written evidence submitted by UNISON

1. About UNISON

1.1. UNISON is the UK's largest trade union representing over 1.3 million workers across public services. UNISON is the largest union in schools, representing over 250,000 members in support staff roles across the UK. UNISON's school members include staff across all types of schools and special units, including academies in England, who work in a variety of roles including administration and management (such as school business managers, administrators, finance officers, exam invigilators, secretaries); facilities (such as school cooks, catering assistants, caretakes, site managers, cleaners); teaching and learning support (such as teaching assistants, cover supervisors, early years practitioners); and specialist or technical (such as ICT staff, technicians, librarians, sports coaches, careers advisers).

1.2. UNISON negotiates nationally, regionally and locally to improve pay, terms and conditions and job security for all school workers. UNISON representatives help to ensure a safe working environment. UNISON campaigns to improve the professional status and recognition of schools support staff and provides training and briefings on a range of professional topics and skills.

1.3. This submission has been prepared for submission to the Public Accounts Committee's inquiry into the condition of school buildings. For questions arising from this briefing please contact Anna Birley on a.birley@unison.co.uk

2. UNISON's view on the condition of school buildings

2.1. The Post-War school buildings programmes relied on the use of quick System builds using a modular construction which did not rely on traditional building skills, and had an estimated 30-year life expectancy.

2.2. Many of the system build buildings have in effect now served double the designed life expectancy and were built of materials such as Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC), which it is now known can fail, with little or no warning presenting a significant risk.[1]

2.3. In addition to structural concerns, many system builds constructed between 1945 - 1980s used asbestos containing materials (ACMs) for fireproofing and insulation and any building built or refurbished up until 2000 potentially contains ACMs.

2.4. It is of great concern to UNISON that staff and students are working and learning in potentially dangerous buildings. It is a priority for the union to ensure that school building safety is being tackled in an urgent, transparent and responsible way.

2.5. The Government must stop concealing the risks posed by school buildings (and other public buildings) from the public and provide, ensuring that there is comprehensive publication of information about school buildings' condition, construction and asbestos in the same way it does for Ofsted and Food hygiene ratings.

3. Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC)

3.1. UNISON is concerned that the Department for Education is yet to release the data collected in its RAAC survey in February.

3.2. UNISON submitted an FOI request to the Department to request this information, but the data continues to be withheld. In June 2023, the Department for Education

[1] https://www.local.gov.uk/topics/housing-and-planning/information-reinforced-autoclaved-aerated-concrete-raac

responded to UNISON's FOI request saying that they are "awaiting the return of a questionnaire from all schools' responsible bodies (trusts, local authorities & dioceses) on the potential presence of RAAC across the school estate. At present, we do not have questionnaire responses for all education sites and many responses are partially complete as responsible bodies are carrying out further investigation. Additionally, identifying RAAC can be difficult, so all reports of suspected RAAC are investigated by RAAC specialist structural consultants commissioned by the department and, where needed, site surveys are undertaken to confirm its presence. This process is ongoing and following investigation, RAAC is frequently found not to be present."

3.3. However, the FOI was able to reveal the potential scale of the problem. The total number of schools with one or more blocks constructed between 1941 and 1990 is 14,683. This figure fluctuates as schools close.

3.4. UNISON surveyed twenty-three schools that we had identified using Laingspan and Integrid designs (two construction methods using RAAC and post-tensioned light frame concrete construction systems popular in the post-war period) and which were included in the first 50 schools announced in the Schools Rebuilding programme. The combination of RAAC and post-tensioned light frame concrete construction systems in these schools could result in a chain reaction whereby should a failure occur in the RAAC changing the stress loads on that type of system, then there is the potential for a catastrophic collapse.

3.5. The responses received from the twenty-three schools shows that they had been informed of the risks some time ago to enable discussions to take place about rebuilding programs, and by the time this information was released building work was well underway, with some seeking to take handovers for September 2023 – yet this money is part of the first round of School Rebuilding phase one projects.

3.6. This means that the Department for Education identified and approached schools with certain construction types well over a year ago for the funding, tendering, commissioning and planning etc. to have taken place, meaning there should be no reason why information on those schools known to the DfE could not have been shared.

3.7. Responses received from schools themselves also showed that a significant theme or pattern of schools not sharing information about the risks with their staff or parents. Thanks to similar phraseology in the responses received from schools and from the DfE, there are indications that advice had been sought by schools from the department to respond to UNISON's questionnaire.

3.8. It is clear from these timelines that the DfE has been aware of the risks associated with RAAC and post-tensioned light frame concrete construction systems for at least a number of years but have not communicated the risks with staff, pupils or parents using those buildings on a daily basis. Meanwhile, the DfE has tried and is continuing to try avoiding any of this information getting out whilst also telling school leaders they are responsible in the event of a safety issue.

4. Asbestos

4.1. A 2019 DfE Asbestos Management Assurance Process (AMAP) report,[2] showed over 80% of the school estate still contains Asbestos. AMAP identified 3,485 schools (17.8% of participating schools) that 'whilst they are compliant with the

[2] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/906343/AMAP_Report_2019.pdf

Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012, their practice is not in line with the department's guidance'.

4.2. The DfE referred 676 state-funded schools and academies in England to the HSE as they did not provide evidence "that they were managing asbestos in line with regulatory requirements. In July 2022, following preliminary indications, the HSE announced it had identified the need for a planned programme of inspections to assess the management of asbestos in schools.

5. The funding gap

5.1. A 2023 House of Commons research briefing[3] showed that capital funding since 2009-10 and 2021-22, declined by around 37 per cent in cash terms and 50 per cent in real terms and was far below the amount needed.

5.2. Research by Landman Economics, commissioned by UNISON, shows that, even with increased funding promised in the Autumn Statement, per pupil funding remains significantly below 2010 levels. A young person graduating from school this year started reception in 2010 – over the duration of their schooling from 2010 to this academic year, £5,384 less will have been spent on their education than if per pupil funding had remained at 2010 levels under the previous government. Between 2010/11 and 2022/23, per pupil spending fell from £7,274 to £6,982 (adjusted for inflation using the GDP deflator), a drop of 4%.

5.3. The Department for Education's (DfE) Condition of School Buildings Survey in May 2021 (based on data from 2017 – 2019) found that it would cost £11.4 billion to repair or replace all defective elements in the school estate. Given inflationary pressures it seems reasonable to assume that this amount will now be much higher.

5.4. At current funding rates, it is estimated it will take over 400 years to fully remove dangerous asbestos from the school's estate.

5.5. No overall plan appears to exist in relation to future building needs across the school estate beyond the proposed 500 new schools, which is inadequate given the current knowledge of foreseeable risks in the aging school estate, and the scale of its likely further dilapidation.

5.6. The Government needs to deliver a comprehensive refurbishment and rebuilding programme across the schools estate that truly meets the need for safe and energy efficient schools for the future, which will also provide jobs, training and economic growth.

July 2023

[3] https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7375/CBP-7375.pdf